



MICHIGAN COUNCIL ON CRIME AND DELINQUENCY

1115 S. Pennsylvania Avenue • Suite 201 • Lansing, Michigan 48912
Telephone: (517) 482-4161 • Fax: (517) 482-0020 • Email: mail@miccd.org

House Education Committee

Testimony re: Policies to address harassment and bullying in schools (HB 4580)

Submitted by Michelle Weemhoff, MSW

April 22, 2010

I first want to thank the House Education Committee for taking time to consider the important legislation aimed at reducing harassment and bullying in schools. It is crucial that school boards take leadership to determine the best course of action for protecting its students. The school system is often our "first line of defense" when it comes to identifying behavioral issues or interpersonal problems among kids. As we know, acting out can often be a sign of deeper issues or needs. As these bills hopefully move forward, I simply want to ensure that strong consideration has been weighed for the potential unintended consequences that could harm, rather than help, students.

The increase of law enforcement and peace officers in our schools has subsequently resulted in an increased number of traditional schoolyard fights being escalated to criminal charges. As important as it is to have anti-harassment policies, we do need to be careful that it doesn't result in unintended consequences of more kids being fed into the school-to-prison pipeline.

Last year, the ACLU of Michigan released a report entitled, "Reclaiming Michigan's Throwaway Kids: Students Trapped in the School-to-Prison Pipeline," which exposed the fact that suspension and expulsion policies disproportionately impact youth of color. School districts do have discretion as to how they handle behavioral issues most of the time.

House Bill 4580 would provide school boards guidance by encouraging them to include provisions within their policies concerning education, parental involvement, reporting, investigation, and intervention.

In regards to intervention, I would particularly urge the Legislature to request that school boards explore policies that support school-based conflict resolution and include graduated sanctions rather than zero tolerance policies. Restorative Justice, for example, is a peaceful conflict resolution tool that brings conflicting parties together to find a way to heal the harm as a "community." It addresses the roots of the problem while teaching accountability and compassion.

Schools that have implemented Restorative Justice practices have had very positive outcomes that result in fewer kids being suspended, expelled or arrested due to behavioral issues at school. In the 2008-2009 school year, the Lansing school district provided Restorative Justice to 1,875 (unduplicated) students. These meetings saved 1,649 days of suspension and 3 days of expulsions. On average, 42% of children served were boys and 58% were girls. Seventy-five percent of the cases resolved were for students between 6th



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and 9th grade, the prime ages when kids begin dropping out of school.
(www.centralmichiganrestorativejustice.com).

Schools serve one of the most vital functions in our community. Not only do they teach us math and reading, but school is one place where we learn how to interact with one another, deal with conflict and stress, and gain the tools to become successful adults. It is our responsibility as a state to ensure that schools are well-supported and well-equipped so that what they can help our children learn peacefully and interact safely.

Respectfully submitted,

Michelle Weemhoff, MSW
Senior Policy Associate
Michigan Council on Crime and Delinquency
517-482-4161
mweemhoff@miccd.org

www.miccd.org